Family Guy Controversy

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ABSTRACT: Family Guy, an animated sitcom that has been airing its wacky, outlandish, and sometimes offensive episodes for the past seventeen years on TV. Seth MacFarlane is the creator of this controversial sitcom Family Guy that has produced a cult following since its pilot aired in 1999. In the show’s seventeen-year history it has produced multiple lawsuits, an ongoing battle with the FCC, and numerous complaints generating from the Parents Television Council. So how is it that one animated sitcom can cause so much controversy?

KEYWORDS: “Family Guy Controversy” “FCC and Family Guy” “Parents Television Council and Family Guy” “Family Guy and lawsuits” “Family Guy Taboos broken”

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Prime time TV is a suitable outlet to preview sitcoms that can eventually become huge sensations in the entertainment world. *Family Guy* is an adult cartoon sitcom that airs Sundays on prime time T.V. Why is the show getting so much controversy then? It’s because the show has tried to push the boundaries of entertainment. Examples include an episode about statutory rape and an episode about marijuana. No other show before *Family Guy* has tried to bring comedy and light to the dark taboos of our society, but are they going too far.

Since the show’s creation, the channel that carries the show (FOX) has already been sued twice, the FCC has complained numerous times, The Parents Television Council has made copious complaints and had the show cancelled for a year, but *Family Guy* still came back. What people like the FCC and The Parents Television Council don’t realize is that if they keep complaining about the show the bigger *Family Guy* will become.

The show’s creator Seth MacFarlane can be seen as a pioneer in the crude humor animated sitcom industry. When his T.V. show (Family Guy) picked up by FOX in 1997, he had no idea how big the show was going to get. Of course the show would had to get some kind of attention since it featured an obnoxious Irish father of three, a talking baby determined to murder it’s mother and a talking dog that’s a cheeky day drinker. No one had ever seen this kind of show before. The show’s protagonist is the obnoxious Irish father of three (Peter Griffin.) The shows first season was basically testing out the boundaries what the show could get away with. The pilot episode was about welfare fraud. The producers and the creator Seth MacFarlane could have played it safe and just made the show’s pilot about anything other than the hot topic of welfare fraud but even at the very beginning of the show Seth wanted to shed light on America’s problem at hand and make the situation funny.

As the episodes rolled each one began to get more and more risky to show on TV. “The first case was the Season 3 finale "When You Wish Upon a Weinstein." While tame by the standards of the show now, it was pulled back in 2002 because it was thought to illicit an anti-Semitic response. And with it featuring a song titled "I Need a Jew," FOX could hardly be blamed for its decision. It later aired in 2004 on the network after Adult Swim put it on television a year prior” (Dudak.) This episode broke a religious barrier that shows like the Simpsons and South Park both that are in the same genre of animated sitcoms haven’t dared to break. This episode exhibited the stereotypes of being Jewish but it also made stereotypes funny not offensive.

*Family Guy* has been on the air for nearly seventeen years but they had their fare share of hard times along the way. “Not surprisingly, the show attracted the ire of several TV watchdog groups, including the Parents Television Council, who've objected to the show's tendency to push the envelope of "good taste." They petitioned Fox to drop the show as early as 2000; the network eventually did give the series the axe after three seasons in 2003, due to low ratings” (Schager.) Surprisingly the show came back in 2004 casing a time slot with Adult Swim. After a little bit of time on Adult Swim the show began to see its ratings rise once again. Fox picked the show back up in 2005 and gave the show’s now time slot of Sundays at 9:00 p.m.

In 2015 *Family Guy* tested how far they could push the invisible boundaries of sensitivity of society by making a subplot of one of their episodes about statutory rape. Glenn Quagmire, the town’s loveable sex freak, finds himself in a horrible situation when he finds his most recent hook up is actually fifteen years old and not twenty three like he presumed. The Parents Television Council had plenty to say about this episode. The council’s president, Tim Winter, appropriated a statement for this episode saying,   
 “Sexual assault is an increasingly troubling problem across America. Joking

about child rape on TV shows and using such patently offensive sexual dialogue — especially when they air at such an early hour and when they attract such a young viewing audience – is a gross violation of a broadcast licensee’s public interest obligation.” (Mediaite)

This shows persistence in The Parents Television Council even after seventeen years they are still willing to say Family Guy is going too far. The episode received an audience of 2.81 million, making it the most watched show on Fox that night. (Kondolojy)

By now one would think it’s a burden for FOX to keep a show like *Family Guy* airing almost every week. Well they wouldn’t be wrong about that. Fox in their now sixteen years caring the show has racked up numerous complaints and three major lawsuits against the network and the show. Surprisingly the three cases took place in 2007. Not being so surprised is that all three-court cases were against Family Guy for making parodies for iconic people such as Carol Burnett and Art Metrano. “The Carol Burnett case in March 2007, the comedienne filed a $2 million lawsuit for copyright infringement against 20th Century FOX. She asserted that the show did not seek permission to use the character she had created decades before. Burnett also alleged that the 18-second scene violated her publicity rights and misappropriation of her name.” (Gerstenberger) After a month of arguments the court settled in favor of Family Guy. The U.S. Defensive Judge assigned to the case did agree that the parody did portray Ms. Burnett in a distasteful manner, but the First Amendment, which assurances freedom of speech.

There are many taboos that Family Guy has made their episodes about such as terrorism, rape, and abortion. Is it appropriate that Seth MacFarlane pushes such hot topics and dark taboos into *Family Guy*? It’s up to the viewer to decide. Plus before every episode of Family Guy there is a message telling the audience that, “Viewer discretion is advised.” So there is always a fare warning to the audience that there will be crude humor before watching *Family Guy*. As long as the show has an appropriate time slot, a reasonable warning for their unpolished humor, and the First Amendment is still in effect Family guy has all the right to shed comedy on taboos no matter how dark they are.

The Federal Communication Commission has been on the back of Seth MacFarlane since he launched his show *Family Guy* on FOX in 1999. The FCC, as it’s called, regulates TV shows such as *Family Guy* to make sure that the language and the content being used is appropriate for audiences viewing the show. Family Guy loves to test the boundaries of the FCC by using dialogue that happens to have cuss words in it. It’s the FCC’s job to “bleep out” the words that viewers might find offensive. Even though *Family Guy* is an animated sitcom the writers and Seth MacFarlane always seem incorporate a naked character in at least one episode in every season that requires a black bar-courtesy of the FCC- to cover the animated character’s genitalia. “According to the FCC's indecency regulations, “material is indecent if, in context, it depicts or describes sexual or excretory organs or activities in terms patently offensive as measured by contemporary community standards for the broadcast medium."” (Par 4 Flint) Seth MacFarlane fired back with an episode of the Family Guy that highlighted everything that the FCC was against with out actually breaking any rules against what to be aired on TV. The episode also comes included with a special song exclusively about how the FCC. The song “The Freakin’ FCC” tells about how the FCC is no more than a special interest group that takes away the fun and real meaning out of the dialogue that we could be using everyday on TV.

After giving these examples of consequences *Family Guy* went through in response to the pioneering of comedy on dark taboos, you would have to think was it worth it? Was it worth it for the creator Seth MacFarlane and everyone whom put so much time and effort into Family Guy to go against the grain? We can also ask if *Family Guy’s* brand of comedy will ever get tired out? Let us think about this show. After multiple lawsuits, an irrefutable battle with the FCC, and numerous complaints spawning from the Parents Television Council, the show is still airing new episodes after seventeen years. So this has to tell us that there is a big enough following for this show that Seth MacFarlane can still fund ways to come up with new, exciting, and possibly offensive episodes. So after trudging through multiple obstacles that could have got the show banned permanently Family Guy has still stood strong to broadcast episodes that might be offensive to some, but they will also show the light humorous side of the dark times we in our society today.

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